

Shabbat Sermon 11 03 17

This week began last Sunday with an incredible concert that Hazzan Basia, Schechter, and our very own Rabbi Jessica Kate Meyer performed at. They performed at this concert. It was, of course, Leonard Cohen, so it couldn't be performance, it was prayer. And after Rabbi Jessica finished singing Dance Me to the End of Love, that familiar, haunting, incredible melody and words, my dear friend Aubrey Glazer, who had written a book about Leonard Cohen, asked rhetorically and powerfully, what's at the end of love? Where is the end of love? Where does it end? Where does it begin? How would one know when one danced to that place? Of course, Leonard Cohen, the poet, the prophet, was using it as a device, as if to say, dance me to the end of love, dance me to that place that has no end, to the infinite place.

But that's the question to begin with tonight. Where does it end? Where does it begin? What are the ABCs of love? Because when we talk about the end of a thing, I want to know where it began, I want to know what its structure is, I want to know what its ABCs are.

Couldn't help this week when the World Series came to an end. Believe it or not, that could end. I didn't want it to, frankly, it was so glorious. All the commentators could speak about, of course, is how excruciatingly important it is that one realizes that the fundamentals are what will determine the game. You can have great hitters and great this and great that, but the fundamentals, what are the fundamentals? What are the ABCs? And because that word fundamentals and fundamentalist is so hot right now, I really want to talk about what is fundamental. What is at the essence? What is the ABC?

So let me first bracket this by saying that in the Jewish tradition, literally ABCs are the fundamentals, not just the alphabet ABCs, not just the phrase ABCs. But the alephbet, the Hebrew alphabet, in all of its beauty and its profundity, the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet are, in our tradition, part of a letter mysticism, a kind of letter theology. The universe is made not of atoms, it isn't made of quarks, it isn't made of strings, it isn't made of all of those other things, it is made of letters. Letters like turtles all the way up and down.

Letters, letters, letters. According to one tradition, God uses the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the 22 letters, in order to create the world. In the beginning God created Et, Aleph to Tuf, A to Z, and then mixed those letters together in a kind of algorithmic, interesting notion of divine intelligence. So letters are ontic, to use a fancy word, letters are being to us. We really believe in the 22 letters, or at least the tradition does. Letters precede words.

In fact, there's even a tradition that says, not that everyone in the world has their own word in the Torah, but everyone in the world has their own letter in the Torah. We counted letters, like gold. We weighed letters. Letters, 22 of them. So let's talk about Aleph, the first letter, meaning the first fundamental, the first A of the ABCs. What is most fundamental, what is it? Well, interestingly enough, we get it tomorrow morning in the Parsha.

The Parsha will give us an insight into a very intense tradition of debate and a very tense relationship between two things that should go together, but are often in a relationship or a dialogical or a dialectical relationship of not being reconciled. And they are really God and

goodness. God and goodness. Well, if you were to ask me, obviously they should go together. It's obvious that religion should be a source of goodness in the world. God, or the source of authority for religion, should be the source of ethics and morality. That human beings should be front and center. But, surprisingly or not, that tension between God and man, God and humans, God and the vertical and the horizontal, don't reconcile easily. But Abraham, tomorrow morning, will give us a way to understand fundamentals, or at least one school of thought within the rabbinic world, and there are many, but one.

So listen to this, everybody. Listen to what happens tomorrow morning. Follow along here. Abraham has just been circumcised. That can't feel good if you're in your 90s, right? And he is kind of hanging out and convalescing in the property of a man named Mamre, in the terebinths of Mamre. He's kind of hanging out there in the hospital, in the infirmary. He's just healing. Chapter 18 of the book of Genesis begins with Abraham healing. He's healing, and he has a vision. There's a debate about whether this is a dream that he has, or it's actually true, like there are actual characters. But here's the vision, or here's the moment.

God, a theophany, God appears to Abraham. Abraham is sick. He's convalescing. The tradition tells us that God came to visit him because he was feeling sick. God visits the sick, says the tradition. And here's what happens. Here's where it becomes interesting. He's having a conversation with God. He's in the middle of a conversation. And he looks up, and he sees. First moment in this parasha, it's named for this also, the seeing or the visioning. People see things, people don't see things. He sees what? Everybody, you know the story? Even if you've never been to school before, maybe? Never been to yeshiva, Bible? What does he see? He sees three, three men, three angels, three people. And they're coming towards him. Now get this. He's in the middle of what with God? A vision.

They're having a moment. He is in the middle of a deep samadhi, nirvikalpa. He's in insof, whatever you want to call it. He's in that place. He is busy. When you are having a dialogue with the big G, and you see three people coming, you say, hold on. To whom? Who do you put on hold? Well, this is the crux of the question. If the ultimate, the ultimate is insof, is God. If that which is so supremely important, so ultimately significant, so fundamentally fundamental, the A to the B, the Aleph to the Beda, you stay in your deep place.

There's nothing beyond that. Three people can wait, because I'm talking to the big G. In fact, the rabbis later on say, in the Mishnah codified in the second century, if you were to be praying the silent reflective prayers that we just ended, and even a snake were to curl itself around your leg, lo yavsik, a person shouldn't interrupt. Prayer interrupts us. We just got intimate, and now you're knocking on the door and you're asking for something. You don't interrupt the ultimate. You don't interrupt the significant that is beyond all other significance. What you interrupt is clearly not ultimate.

I used to call my dad, and he was a hotshot lawyer, and he used to tell me this, because he wanted me to remember this forever. He said, you listen to me, boys. You need me. You call me. And I will pick up the phone. It doesn't matter who's in my office. It doesn't matter how busy I am. If you need me, you call me. You are more significant. You are more fundamental. You are more ultimate. My relation with you transcends, and of course this doesn't mean everybody who doesn't interrupt, it doesn't mean just... Think about this for a moment.

And so you know already the answer. גדול הבנסת אורחים יותר מקבלת פני השכינה say the Rabbis, who in the debate between submission and surrender to G-d, and ethics and morality and honoring human life, they valorize this moment, even though Abraham's character will of course evolve, and by the end of the parasha tomorrow morning, chapter 22, we don't even know this Abraham.

Chapter 22 of the book of Genesis will be Abraham giving up his son when G-d says, please, can I have your son? Abraham says, okay, great. You want him? Take him. More complex than that, I know. But here in this moment, the Rabbis say that Abraham was willing to interrupt the conversation with G-d in order to say hello to strangers, to receive and to offer hospitality to someone who came looking. Greater is the horizontal than the vertical. Woe is to us, say the Rabbis, when we forget the aleph, the A, the most fundamental of the fundamentals, that the human being before you is an expression of the divine love.

There is a story, of course, this is reflected in other teachings from the Rabbis. People have heard of this teaching, Derech Eretz Kagal Torah? Ever hear of that? Derech Eretz means the way of the land. It means manners, being good. Kagal Torah, it comes before Torah. I used to hear growing up, how many people, show of hands, you don't have to out yourself, I'll just out myself. I'm a yeshiva kid. How many people heard, when you were being rude to someone, Derech Eretz? Derech Eretz? Derech Eretz means being a good person. Derech Eretz means common grace. It means politeness. It precedes Torah, say the Rabbis. It precedes Torah. It's a very powerful, a very powerful notion. The notion that every human being is a letter in the Torah, every single one. And that, most importantly here, those letters are even more important than the words that they form, the sentences that they construct, the paragraphs, and the ideologies, and the stories, but that each letter stands alone. That you can't know all of the letters from one of them, they are each unique.

There's a story in the Talmud that says, that there was once a Rabbi, who was teaching Torah in public, during the Roman period, and they caught him, because it was illegal, and they wrapped him up in the Torah, and they lit him on fire, and as he was burning to death, his students said to him, Rabbi, sage, master, what do you see? He says, I see parchment burning, and letters flying. Letters that fly. Letters that remain. Letters that transcend. Letters that are greater than the stories that they then become constituent pieces of. Letters like human lives, each one unique. None of them reducible to other letters. None of them aggregatable into much greater stories without loss. דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה This is the reason why the aleph doesn't begin the Torah, but because before there was a bet, there's an aleph that doesn't make it into the Torah. The aleph of the human being. The aleph of every faith. That's what it is to be a fundamentalist.

We need another word. We need another place for this distortion of what it is to be a religious fundamentalist. A religious fundamentalist knows the ABCs, the aleph bets. A religious fundamentalist knows that human beings come before ideologies. A religious fundamentalist, and all of you are religious fundamentalists, knows that love transcends hate. That the particular is beyond Kant. The particular is so much greater than the universal in that sense.

Each human being, each situation It's remarkable that the same man, this Abraham character, who expresses that hospitality and human kindness is greater than even the

divine. In chapter 18, at the very end of that chapter, comes to a city. He's told about a city that is about to be obliterated, and he begins to fight for the righteous. He takes God to task and says, God, you can't be asking me, God, you can't be asking me, God, to go along with this notion of a group punishment for all of the human beings in that place, all of the letters. There must be at least 50 letters in there that are holy. There must be 40, 30, 10 letters. You, God, must know that I could never live as a fundamentalist without knowing this fundamental, that every letter is unique and every letter worthy. I'm going to fight for every letter.

22 letters. We do this in our lives. You do it in your life. I do it in my life. We work from one story and then expand that story to include all such stories. If it happened once, it'll happen always. That's the root of terror. To expand from one situation into all situations, that's what terrorists want to do. They want us to be afraid that if it happened here, it could happen there. If one person looked this way when they did it, it must mean all people who look that way are likewise subsumed under that category, under that aggregate. If I got hurt once in a relationship, it means that all loving relations in the future will be the same way. If my wife did this one thing, I'm going to remind her of it over and over and over again, every time it happens, but it was different. It's not exactly the same.

I know two little boys I happen to know them, I don't know how, but two little boys that I am familiar with. And the older brother has been treating the younger brother in a certain way for a while and he's changed the older brother. And the little brother can't get that yet. He keeps thinking, well, he's preemptively, he's still back on last year's words, last year's stories. That's the root of it.

I went to see a play last night, Tiny Beautiful Things. Is that what it's called? That's what it's called, right? Tiny Beautiful Things? If you have a night and you want to go see it, it's pretty amazing. It's down at the Public and it's profoundly beautiful. Basically, the play is set with four characters, but the principal character is an advice columnist who receives all kinds of letters. Her name is Sugar. As the author of the column, she's Sugar, and they just write in all these amazing stories, the kind of things that I hear all day long. The most important, I think, letter that was written to her, and if you all have fallen asleep, now's a good time to wake up. We're coming in for a landing. The most important letter is from someone who calls himself Little Dead Dad, whose son is killed at the age of 22 by a drunk driver who runs a red light, and he writes in asking how he can go on, and he says, I want to apologize that I can't write a letter. Letters are escaping me. I'm going to write to you in bullet points, in a list. Can't write letters. I'll write a list, and so he then writes, of course, 22 points, and this is how Sugar responds also in 22 moments, and she writes, Your boy is dead, but he will continue to live within you. Your love and grief will be unending. Your love and your grief will be unending, but it will also shift in shape. There are things about your son's life and your own that you can't understand now. There are things that you will understand in one year and in 10 years and 20, 14. Point 14.

The word obliterate comes from the Latin means against, and obliterate means letter. A literal translation is being against the letters. Obliterate is to be against the letters. So it was impossible for you to write me a letter, so you made me a list. It is impossible for you to go on as you were before, so you must go on as you never have. It's wrong, she writes, that this is required of you. It is wrong that your son died. It will always be wrong,

but that obliterated place is equal parts destruction and creation. The obliterated place is pitch black and bright light. It is water and parched earth. It is mud and it is manna, and the real work of deep grief is making a home in that place.

We are on the Shabbat after obliteration. Everything that happened this week on Halloween Day was against the letters, against the fundamentals, against the ABCs, against the alephbet. It is fundamentally at odds with what our tradition in one voice says. There are many voices. We have violent voices in our tradition. There are violent voices in the Buddhist tradition and in the Hindu tradition and in the Christian tradition and in the Muslim tradition, but all of them are one letter in 22-letter sequence. It isn't the whole of any of them. And so we stand obliterate against the letters that are aggregated, the letters that wipe away the uniqueness of this olive before me.

We stand tonight, all of us, at least me now, you in a moment, in the obliterated place, the grief, the mud, the manna, and on a weekend where we will extend night, we say enough. Enough with the generalizing. Enough with the skira achat, seeing everyone in one way. We will not get to the end if we don't get to the end with love. There is no end to love, but there is an end with love. This dance to the end with love is a marathon everyone. It's a marathon. It's not a sprint.

And so tomorrow and then Sunday, as you walk around and see people who have come from Belgium and from around the world to say this city is great because of all the letters that are here. This city is great because it rose from the ashes of broken letters. This city is great in spite of all of its flaws because of all the beauty that comes with each unique soul.

I'll be there with my good friend Robert Gedalia on Sunday afternoon rooting people on, saying you can do it. And there's a little place inside of me that says that's what we need to do to each other all the time is to dance each other to the end with love day by day by day by day tomorrow and Sunday and Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and so it's a marathon. God's name, our tradition says, has the numerical value of 26. And whenever there's a marathon I keep thinking we're running 26 miles, one mile for each of the value of the divine name in our tradition with each step saying yeah I could stop but this is a dance to the end with love. So lift somebody up tonight, lift somebody up tomorrow, lift somebody up next week and be super careful that that quality that says what is my absolute, what will I interrupt for is front and center. Who will you interrupt for, what will you interrupt for, what is your absolute, what is your fundamental, what is your olive.

And I hope that if you ask yourself that it will be love, it will be relationships because the only way that we're going to make it to the end together is if we build a world with love. Please rise.